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ABSTRACT

A pilot project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and a state college educational trust fund to improve writing in the humanities and across the curriculum is described in this paper. Also presented are the obstacles confronted in establishing the project, a seven-point strategy developed to counter those obstacles, the operating design of the program, the specific techniques of writing instruction adopted by the faculty members who participated, and other direct results of the project. A major support service of the project--a writing consultancy--is discussed, and the theories and practices introduced in the project's summer workshops are outlined. (AEA)

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THE HUMANITY OF WRITING: THE NEH CROSS-DISCIPLINARY WRITING PROGRAM AT WEST CHESTER STATE COLLEGE

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THE HUMANITY OF WRITING: THE NEH CROSS-DISCIPLINARY WRITING PROGRAM AT WEST CHESTER STATE COLLEGE

By

Robert H. Weiss

The cross-disciplinary Writing Program at West Chester State College began with a chance remark my dean made in Spring 1977. Looking up from the Chronicle of Higher Education and musing aloud about what another college was doing about the writing crisis, he asked me why our college couldn't have an organized program of writing instruction in all academic disciplines. Since I follow the theoretician Kenneth Burke in considering rhetoric not merely words but a form of action, I answered that we could, if he would let me have some travel money and secretarial assistance. Shortly, my equally visionary academic Vice-President approved the preliminary thinking on the plan; a few months later a full proposal was made to the faculty and a parallel proposal sent to the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The result of this activity was a pilot project funded by the Endowment and a state college Educational Trust Fund to improve writing in the humanities and throughout or across the curriculum. The Writing Program at West Chester synthesized some of the most practical and theoretically sound features of similar endeavors on other campuses. In its initial year, it captured the spirit of the campus, won strong administrative support, and gained a foothold in the general education curriculum.

Since many college faculties are now entertaining thoughts of developing similar or better programs, they might benefit considerably from learning of the obstacles we confronted, the operating design of the West Chester Program, the specific techniques of writing instruction our faculty now uses, and the various direct results and spin-offs of the project.

Some background is necessary in order to understand why non-English faculty members at West Chester are so vigorously committed to their new mode of teaching. West Chester is the second largest of the fourteen Pennsylvania State Colleges--a multi-purpose institution of about 8,500 students. Teaching rather than research is its main function. Most of its students are in Education, Music, Health and Physical Education, Business Administration, and other "professional" fields. West Chester is typical of those state colleges throughout the United States that "emerged" during the 60's and then discovered in the 70's the emergence trauma of dwindling legislative appropriations, program cutbacks, and declining College Board scores. Its faculty, a diverse group numbering about 500, had often expressed their concern over student writing abilities and inevitably looked to the English Department to <u>do</u> something about student writing performance. In 1976, to their credit, they increased the English composition requirement, and some time shortly thereafter many of them expressed interest in the proposal that ultimately led to the NEH Writing Program at West Chester.

During the Fall and Spring semesters of 1977-78, I campaigned all around campus for the Writing Program proposal. I was invited to address a number of departments to explain how the Program might benefit their students, and I collected many expressions of support. Representatives from 6 of West Chester's sister institutions also communicated their interest

in using the program idea as a model. Despite the excitement generated, important obstacles existed. Some members of my English Department tried to squelch the program because they feared that its success might drive them out of the composition business, while some others merely fretted because it meant more detested composition work; and many of them paid no attention. Some faculty members balefully pointed out that the Program itself demonstrated the inadequacy of the English Department to do its job; others feared that grading written work would be too onerous for them or that giving writing instruction in content courses would cut down on the amount of content offered; and still others paid no attention.

I suppose that all of these attitudes of hostility and apathy are typical. They did not prevail at West Chester and, I hope, would also be minority positions elsewhere. At West Chester, a seven-point strategy was developed to counter these nay-sayings.

(1) The Program received student support and was amply publicized as being good for students.

(2) The opposition was softened and converts were won when the Program's consultancy service--about which more later--was recognized as something really helpful for faculty members.

(3) All departments were swayed to some extent by the argument that the job of improving student writing was too great for one department.

(4) The content faculty was placated by having the Program removed from English Department control; this move also effectively side-stepped much of the controversy within that department.

(5) The English Department in turn softened because the Program's personnel derived from its membership and because it gained several graduate assistantships, summer contracts for several faculty members, and several new undergraduate and graduate writing courses to attract new students.

(6) The NEH grant enabled the Program to offer stipends to faculty members attending the first summer workshop, and the faculty members selected as workshop participants came from a wide variety of departments.

(7) We carefully planned the faculty workshop to be supportive, helpful, and successful; for example, the staff was instructed against scowling condescendingly at incorrect grammatical usage.

As a more general strategy, Program publicity statements were always supportive and non-threatening, always suggesting ways to help content faculty, and always affirming the centrality of the English Department's composition courses in the college curriculum.

Thus the aim and design of the proposed program gradually received acceptance from faculty, students, and administration. Specifically, the aim was to build on the writing skills established in the freshman English courses and to extend these skills through writing practice and writing instruction in other disciplines. The design was to include workshops for faculty development, support services for faculty and students, two new graduate courses, and a dissemination effort--the last a deliberate consciousness-raising, public-relations campaign to advance the cause of writing in disciplines other than English. The college community initially expected a remedial program of some dreary but hard-nosed sort. Most of the faculty members in the first summer workshop confessed to highly traditional

linguistic attitudes; and some of them had anticipated relearning the fine points of grammar, punctuation, and spelling in the workshop so that they could feel more secure in doing hatchet jobs on their student's foul papers. But the proposal in circulation was not just for the remediation of unsatisfactory writing; rather, it was to enhance and improve writing, writing instruction, and attitudes to writing. It was intended as a humanistic endeavor to encourage student and faculty members not merely to recognize the importance of clear and effective written communication, i.e., good written products, but also to recognize the centrality of writing in all academic disciplines, and the potentialities of writing as a means of fixing and reinforcing learning and as a means of discovery. Thus far we are more than satisfied with the way the program is regarded on campus; the integrity of its humanistic goals has been maintained, and faculty are cooperating in just the right spirit--all except for one diehard, however, who refuses to attend or walks out of any committee discussion of the Writing Program.

One of the reasons the writing program has been received so well is the major support service--the Writing Consultancy--incorporated within it. As part of the effort to foster wide-spread writing improvement, the Consultancy not only offers students help with their written assignments, it offers faculty and administrators help with their written material too. Moreover, unlike most writing laboratories or tutoring centers, ours takes a name and philosophy that imply an equality between client and consultant. The sometimes demeaning and inhibiting attitudes of other writing centers--often called clinics or laboratories--simply don't exist, and as a result no one feels ashamed to come to us for help. Students who consult us do not have their work done for them. After they state their problem

with completing an assignment, their work is evaluated and diagnosed, and they receive suggestions about improving it. Even when we assist faculty members and administrators with scholarly articles, we do no comprehensive red-penciling. We stand by our mandate to be a service to improve teaching and learning through writing, and we refuse to be used as a copy-editing agency. Enough professors on campus are committed to the philosophy of the Writing Program that large numbers of students now understand that good writing performance correlates with good grades. Since visits to the Consultancy are voluntary (or made under pressure by instructors), student clients are pleased to get assistance that they expect will raise their grades. As a former president of our student government association put it, "Previously, the only students with the opportunity to develop good writing skills were those taking English. The Consultancy is designed to help students regardless of the classes they schedule."

A better reason for the success of the Program to date is the variety of techniques of writing instruction it has made available to content faculties. In our summer workshop, we introduced theories and practices which many good teachers of composition already know and implement:

(1) that a threatening atmosphere does not conduce to good writing, and that supportive attitudes from faculty and peers should be established before writing is assigned;

(2) that such attitudes are best developed when professors are sensitive to some of the differences between descriptive and prescriptive grammar, between expressive and transactional writing, and between summative and formative evaluation of writing;

(3) that much of the fulmination over individual pieces of writing

or over the often-heralded writing crisis is idiosyncratic;

(4) that all writing assignments given to students need not be reviewed or evaluated by the professor;

(5) that peer review may ultimately improve student writing performance;

(6) that all writing tasks need not yield finished products but that such assignments as keeping of an academic journal related to course content or frequently feeding back course content may improve both learning and writing performance;

(7) that major assignments such as course papers are best approached in stages, with issues of correctness initially suspended while attention is given to thinking about, choosing, and narrowing down a topic; to developing a tentative plan, to producing a first draft, and to reformulating and revising, in second and third drafts; and

(8) that some consideration should be given to such rhetorical matters as the selection and analysis of an audience and the creation of a practical occasion and purpose for writing. (In the case approach to composition, for example, a student is given these as well as a specific role and the data necessary for completing the assignment. Cases applicable to a variety of academic and technical disciplines have been found on our campus to motivate students to write and to improve their writing.)

This list briefly and generally surveys the principles and techniques of teaching writing that we shared with our colleagues in other departments. Crucial for each one was substantiation by empirical or experiential evidence—in other words, we did not merely proffer individual perspectives

and preferences.

Now using whatever of these techniques they please, my colleagues in composition have shown themselves to be a remarkable lot. Most of them cooperated in a large survey of student writing apprehension; one of them has just conducted basic research on writing as a means of learning; four others reported their experimental projects in teaching writing at the 1979 Conference on College Composition and Communication; two have read papers at a program of the Delaware Valley Writing Council; 15 are involved in the Spring 1979 research project on writing as a mode of learning; and a variety of others in mid-career are now emphasizing writing in their subject-matter classes. A monthly Writing Program newsletter provides them with a forum for new ideas. They sound like an English department's dream; but they are not English teachers; they are faculty members in the humanities, sciences, social sciences, and applied disciplines. Given the fact that West Chester is now on the verge of reforming its general education curriculum, all of these moves are even more significant.

The research project in writing to learn is quite promising for college educators. In this project, each participant teaches at least two sections of the same subject, one section in standard manner (usually lecture combined with discussion), the other using the same approach but adding certain writing assignments at frequent intervals to "feed back" course content. These assignments, which are not graded for quality but are required for the course, are intended to reinforce or "fix" cognitive retention, and to increase student learning. They are not traditional essay examiniations, term papers, or short papers. Rather, they consist of a wide variety of "small" writing/learning tasks done regularly and frequently, in the middle of a class, at the end, or as homework. Sometimes they are personal and

expressive--for example, answers to questions like "What did I learn about _____?" and "Which concept discussed today was most clear to you, and which most confusing?"--and may be responded to but not evaluated by the instructor. Sometimes they are informative--for example, "Now define the concept of regression in statistics"--and may be checked for acceptable clarity by another student or by the teacher. The project is an attempt to demonstrate empirically something many of us intuit and preach--that writing improves learning and that teaching with writing improves teaching. Given such demonstration, West Chester will be in a position to complete the move it recently made to install writing-emphasis courses as a part of its general education curriculum and as part of advanced curricula in a number of academic majors.

West Chester State College's cross-disciplinary Writing Program thus continues to evolve. Already plans are afoot to instruct all of our student teachers--and we graduate almost eight hundred yearly in every field of secondary and elementary education--in our Program's principles and techniques. With them, we are preparing to extend our research project on writing and learning to nearby schools and colleges and then to disseminate its results to the academic community. The college is immensely gratified that the National Endowment for the Humanities has given impetus to all of this activity, and I am immensely grateful to my West Chester colleagues for seizing the day.